

Legislative Audit Division

State of Montana



Report to the Legislature

February 2001

Performance Audit

State Parks Program

Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks

This report contains general information on state parks operations and programs. Issues for consideration include:

- ▶ Improving maintenance methodologies for fishing access sites.
- ▶ Examining overall program direction.

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Legislative Audit Division

Performance Audit

State Parks Program

Parks Division

Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks

Members of the audit staff involved in this audit were Lisa Blanford, Tom Cooper, Angie Grove, Anthony Patch, Kent Rice, Kent Wilcox, and Mike Wingard.

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February 2001

The Legislative Audit Committee
Of the Montana State Legislature

We conducted a performance audit of the Parks Division in the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. This division is responsible for operating and maintaining state parks and fishing access sites across the state.

This report contains issues for additional review and department management consideration. The written response from the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks is included at the end of the report.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance of department staff during the audit.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott A. Seacat", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Scott A. Seacat
Legislative Auditor

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Introduction

At the request of the Legislative Audit Committee, we examined program activities of the Parks Division at the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP). The Parks Division is responsible for administering programs related to state parks, recreation sites, and fishing access sites (FAS) across the state. Other programs administered by the division include trails development, land and water conservation funds, and Capitol Complex maintenance.

Operational Controls are in Place

Division staff are responsible for operating and maintaining over 300 sites including 41 state parks, 14 "affiliated lands," and 275 fishing access sites. As part of our review, we examined operational controls such as defined procedures, methods for communicating with staff, and management of program activities. To gather general information on state parks operations and FAS maintenance, we visited 30 state parks (66%) and 86 FAS (31%) across the state. Based on these visits, we concluded on the general maintenance and physical condition of division sites.

We focused on duties conducted by park operational specialists. Park operational specialists conduct the day to day operations at all state parks. Operational duties required at all parks include:

- ▶ Developing park management plans.
- ▶ Supervising staff and volunteers.
- ▶ Conducting on-site maintenance and compliance monitoring.
- ▶ Coordinating with various interest groups.
- ▶ Monitoring park expenditures and budgets.
- ▶ Proposing future capital projects.
- ▶ Collecting and depositing state park fees.
- ▶ Compiling visitation data for each site.

We found operational controls are in place. Defined procedures are available and used for key staff duties and for tracking fiscal compliance. Communication occurs on a regular basis for directing program activities.

Report Summary

Overall, State Parks Appear Well-Maintained

Generally, we found state parks well maintained and in good condition. Sites were trash free; areas were mowed/trimmed as appropriate; facilities were clean; and roads were generally in good condition. Maintenance responsibilities were clearly delineated and assigned to the various regional staff.

FAS Maintenance Practices Could be Improved in Some Regions

FAS maintenance is completed by the regional maintenance supervisors and their roving maintenance crew. To review this area, we examined FAS maintenance through visits to 86 sites and interviews with each region's parks manager and maintenance supervisor.

Generally, we found regional maintenance supervisors had a methodology for assessing on-going maintenance needs. However, we believe steps could be taken to strengthen maintenance in two of the six regions. Audit observations noted sites with poorly maintained roads, littered camping areas, unmowed areas, unstocked latrine facilities, and found inadequate signs to direct visitors.

The standardized methodologies currently followed in four of the regions include periodic site visits and input from park operational specialists. These methods also included specific staff assignments (either by river drainage or on a set regional travel schedule); standardized equipment throughout the region, use of barricades to prevent off-road driving, traffic control measures, and traveling with a complete crew and equipment supply at all times. We believe using these methods in all six regions would improve maintenance and help ensure statewide consistency. We recommend the department develop and use standardized FAS site maintenance methodologies for all regions.

Parks Operations Comply with Primitive Park Designations

As part of audit compliance testing, we examined how division staff ensure compliance with the primitive parks designation in section 23-1-116, MCA. This statute established a list of 15 parks where specific development is prohibited. These 15 sites include:

Installing electrical lines, creating RV sanitary dump sites, and building new roads are prohibited at these sites. We visited seven of these sites and interviewed regional staff who are assigned oversight

responsibilities. Based on the interviews and our observations, we did not note any instances of noncompliance with primitive parks statutory requirements. Overall the division has taken steps to maintain the primitive status of the listed sites.

Policy Considerations

In 1989 a State Parks Futures Committee was appointed by the department with approval from the governor and legislative leaders. This committee was assigned the task of making recommendations about the proper role, priorities, and funding for state parks. In November 1990, detailed recommendations were made to the Governor relating to program needs and direction for future parks system operations.

Recommendations from that report provided useful guidelines, according to department officials, that have since directed Parks Division activities including:

- Developing a division-wide vision statement.
- Completing specific site management plans.
- Expanding partnerships with private/local groups and other agencies.
- Reclassifying division lands.
- Receiving additional funding support.
- Developing several “model” park destinations.

These recommendations laid the groundwork for the program strengths noted in this report. However, there have been new impacts to the system which warrant further policy consideration.

Report Summary

Park Fee Revenues

In the State Parks Futures report, it was recommended all users pay equitable fees for use of state park facilities. This has not occurred. User fees at the time of the Futures report (1990) were \$860,703. Ten years later (2000) projected fee revenue is approximately the same, \$861,693. Several changes impacted collection of park fees. The Primitive Parks Act, established in 1993, exempted a third of the state parks from the fee system for Montana residents. In addition, park resources for monitoring fee compliance have not increased. We believe it may be time to more formally evaluate the park fee system.

Park Resources

Availability of program resources such as funds and FTE have always been a consideration for the state parks system. At the time of the Futures study, it was determined over 30 FTE were needed in the next five year period to capitalize on the economic benefits of a strong park system. Since that recommendation ten years ago, less than 10 FTE have been added to the system. Fee compliance, quality of visitor services, and program development are all impacted by the number of staff available in the parks system.

Statutory Park Designations

Since November 1990, two statutory designations for specific site management have impacted the park system. The Primitive Parks Act (section 23-1-116, MCA) established a list of fifteen designated primitive parks eight years ago. In addition, section 23-1-130, MCA, designates Chief Plenty Coups and Pictograph Cave State Parks as park assets that are most at risk and vulnerable. We found these laws impact division maintenance planning and fee revenues. Anytime major improvements or changes are proposed, the division must seek, and/or the legislature must take statutory action. This limits the division's ability to respond to local input for changes or developments at those sites.

Other Policy Considerations

During the course of our audit, we identified other policy questions that need to be addressed, including:

- ▶ Is the State Parks Program a natural resource protection program or a tourism program?
- ▶ How does having two key historical and cultural sites outside the system impact state parks operations?
- ▶ How is coordination with tourism and travel promotion assured?
- ▶ What are the long-term maintenance and replacement needs of an aging infrastructure?
- ▶ Should operations continue to place high reliance on volunteer staff?
- ▶ How should the state's Tourism Advisory Council and the Heritage Preservation and Development Commission be more involved in parks decisions?
- ▶ Who are the system's primary customers - residents or tourists?

These questions and their answers suggest a need to reanalyze the direction and future of the Parks Division. Since issuance of the State Parks Futures report in 1990, numerous internal and external changes have occurred with regard to Montana's park system. Given the magnitude of these changes and noted policy questions, it appears to be time to address these issues and re-evaluate the direction of the state parks programs.

Summary

The original approach to long-term policy development was taken in 1990 when the State Parks Futures Committee was organized. This committee included legislative members, representatives from the business community, tourism officials, and local officials. We believe the current questions and changes related to Parks Division's programs warrants consideration from a similar committee.

We recommend the department re-establish the State Parks Futures Committee to address issues impacting parks operations including:

Report Summary

- Park fee revenues.
- Park resources.
- Statutory parks designations.
- Potential long-term policy changes.
- Other policy considerations.

Chapter I - Introduction

Introduction

At the request of the Legislative Audit Committee, we examined program activities of the Parks Division at the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP). The Parks Division is responsible for administering programs related to state parks, recreation sites, and fishing access sites (FAS) across the state. Other programs administered by the division include trails development, land and water conservation funds administration, and Capitol Complex maintenance.

Audit Objectives

General audit objectives focused on:

- ▶ Reviewing operational controls.
- ▶ Examining general site maintenance.
- ▶ Reviewing statutory compliance.

During audit planning, we also identified several policy issues which impact the division's ability to manage and direct its program. We examined these issues and gathered related information during the course of this audit. These issues are discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

Audit Methodologies

We visited the six FWP regions that operate Parks Division programs. (At the time of this review, there were no Parks Division staff or state parks in Region 6-Glasgow.) Interviews were held with thirty-one division staff including regional park managers, maintenance supervisors, park rangers, and park operational specialists. Interviews focused on determining duties performed, procedures used, and processes followed. Overall budget information for each region and each site/park within the region was reviewed to test compliance with program statutes.

A sample of state parks and FAS within each region was visited to note general site condition and any potential problem areas. General management information on park sites visited was obtained including park management plans, environmental assessments/environmental impact statements, visitor surveys completed in the past five years, and other park management studies. Fee and revenue data was examined.

Chapter I - Introduction

Interviews were held with division staff in Helena. The budget process was discussed to identify mechanisms for tracking compliance with various statutory funding restrictions. Processes and procedures for the following areas were discussed and documented:

- ▶ Tracking and prioritizing maintenance.
- ▶ Developing management plans.
- ▶ Prioritizing and monitoring capital projects.
- ▶ Ensuring compliance with statutes.

The State Parks Futures report submitted to the governor and the 52nd Legislature in November 1990 was reviewed. The State Parks Futures Committee was appointed by the FWP department in August 1989. The committee made recommendations about the proper role, priorities, and funding for state parks. Progress on applicable report recommendations was examined during our audit.

To address issues raised by the Legislative Audit Committee, audit work focused primarily on activities of the state parks and FAS maintenance programs rather than other division programs such as the State Trails or Recreation Grants programs.

Compliance

We found the Parks Division is in compliance with applicable statutory requirements. The legislature established specific requirements in various statutes relating to parks' operations. These requirements range from various earmarked fund designations to defining what level of services should be provided in specific parks. Audit testing did not identify noncompliance with these requirements.

General audit findings and conclusions in relation to these statutes are discussed in detail in Chapter III. Audit testing focused on various operational requirements and funding restrictions.

Report Organization

This report contains three additional chapters. Chapter II provides a general overview of state parks history, organization, and funding sources. Chapter III outlines our findings related to division operations. Chapter IV describes issues for long-range planning and program direction.

Chapter II - Background

Introduction

State parks are found in a wide range of landscapes across the state and offer a diversity of visitor services such as interpretive tours, picnic areas, and concessions. Other recreational sites across the state include fishing access sites (FAS), rifle ranges, and recreational corridors. The Parks Division at the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) is responsible for managing these sites and their related services. This chapter provides general information on Parks Division operations and funding sources, as well as program history and background.

State Parks Program History

In 1929 the Montana Land Board was authorized by the legislature to set aside state lands for parks. However, Montana's first state park was not established until 1936 when the National Park Service donated Lewis and Clark Caverns. In 1939, a three-member State Parks Commission was appointed by the governor to conserve "the scenic, historic, archaeological, scientific, and recreational resources of the state." The next step in developing the State Parks Program occurred in 1947 when the system received its first legislative appropriation.

System changes occurred again in 1953 when the State Parks Commission was abolished and the designated park sites and their \$45,000 annual budget transferred to the State Highway Commission. State parks were administered by that agency until 1965 when the Montana State Parks Program was transferred to the Department of Fish and Game. General park program oversight was also moved to the Fish and Game Commission.

Since moving to what is now FWP, the program expanded in several areas. For example, the system is now allocated a portion of federal motorboat fuel tax to support boating and fishing sites. Through these changes, state parks evolved from one site and one program to a system of numerous sites and a wide array of programs. (See Appendices A and B for a complete listing of all state parks and FAS across the state.)

Chapter II - Background

Current State Parks Program Mission

The Parks Division's program mission is defined as the need to:

- ▶ Conserve the diversity of the state's natural, cultural, and recreational amenities.
- ▶ Provide resource education and interpretation.
- ▶ Help facilitate sustainable economic development through tourism.

Division Site Responsibilities

Division staff are responsible for operating and maintaining over 300 sites including 41 state parks, 14 "affiliated lands," and over 275 fishing access sites. State park sites range in size from Makoshika State Park (11,500 acres) to Granite Ghost Town (one building). The State Parks Program administers over 30,000 acres. Park staff are responsible for developing cultural, historic, and interpretive components for park sites as well as ensuring visitor safety and compliance with site regulations.

Fishing access sites, encompassing an additional 33,000+ acres, provide fishing access to Montana's lakes, rivers, and streams. These sites are diverse and are located throughout Montana. Sites offer access to cold-water trout streams in the western portion of the state and warm-water fisheries in eastern Montana. Some sites offer overnight camping and others day use only. Site management duties include site/road maintenance, replacement of signs/picnic tables/fire grates, and litter control. Long-term and short-term maintenance plans are developed for these sites.

Montana's state parks have 1.6 million people visit annually to enjoy activities such as learning about Montana history and culture, boating, picnicking, and wildlife viewing. Visits to FAS for camping and fishing exceed 2.5 million annually. A recent department survey conducted of on-site users indicated high levels (94%) of satisfaction with programs and services provided.

Other division-affiliated lands include shooting ranges, State Capitol Complex grounds, and river recreation areas. Division

Chapter II - Background

responsibilities for these sites range from day-to-day site monitoring to occasional maintenance and posting of informational signs.

In addition to management of specific sites, the division's State Trails Program provides for both motorized and non-motorized trail developments. Related program activities include awarding snowmobile grooming grants (over 3,200 trail miles), as well as creating and enhancing recreational trails. Another division program includes the Recreation Grants Program which administers the federal Land and Water Conservation fund for the development of community and state recreational lands.

Division Staffing

The Parks Division headquarters is located in Helena. Division staff are distributed among seven department regional offices. Regional offices are in Kalispell, Missoula, Bozeman, Great Falls, Billings, Glasgow, and Miles City. Division staff are generally allocated based on the various sites and operations within each region. Six of the regions include a regional parks manager, a maintenance supervisor, and park operational specialists. Recent staffing changes added a parks manager in Region 6. Since there are currently no parks in this region, the manager will focus on FAS management. The following table outlines division FTE in each of the regions.

Chapter II - Background

Table 1
FTE Allocation by Region

Region	FTE	# of Parks	# of FAS
1-Kalispell	15.54	6	28
2-Missoula	10.40	9	50
3-Bozeman	30.70	10	83
4-Great Falls	10.96	4	40
5-Billings	13.37	6	38
6-Glasgow	1.00	0	13
7-Miles City	9.45	6	23
Helena			
(Central Office)	<u>12.13</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Totals	103.55	41	275

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from department records.

In addition to parks managers, division staff include park rangers, conservation specialists, and seasonal maintenance workers. FTE include a mix of permanent and temporary/seasonal personnel. In addition to permanent and seasonal division staff, over 1,500 volunteers and interns contribute a reported 30,000 hours of work each year. Volunteers provide program services such as camp hosts, tour guides, and site caretakers. Interns are generally used for special projects and interpretive programs.

Division User Fees

The first user fee was established by the Montana State Parks Commission in 1939 with a tour fee of \$0.75 per adult and \$0.25 per child for the one state park, Lewis and Clark Caverns. Since that time various fee changes have occurred. Beginning in 1963, the fees were deposited into the state's General Fund. Four years later, the legislature earmarked all park fees to be used exclusively for park operations.

Current State Parks Fees

The current biennial fee rule for the Montana State Park System became effective December 1999. This rule outlines fees for park entrance, camping, group use, fee exemptions, and potential compliance penalties. This rule is based on several statutes which authorize the collection of recreational user fees. There are separate requirements for noncommercial and commercial users. Generally, the daily entrance fee is for gaining access to “designated fee areas” of the State Park System and is \$4.00 per vehicle or \$1.00 per person. A state parks passport can also be purchased for an annual pass to all parks fee areas. This passport is \$20 per vehicle for Montana residents and \$24 per vehicle for non-residents. There are discounts for “Early Bird” passport purchases. Low-income passports are also available for residents who meet low-income eligibility criteria. Other parks fees are charged for miscellaneous facilities and services such as guided tours, firewood, etc. Montana residents do not pay fees at designated primitive state parks. Generally, parks fees are paid with self-pay envelopes which are provided at park entrances. Fees are then collected on a periodic basis by park staff.

In addition to entrance fees, there are state parks camping fees which start at \$12.00 and can be higher at sites with more developed visitor services/camping options. For example, the camping fee for the tepee at Beavertail Hill in Region 2 is \$25.00 a night. State parks passport holders receive a \$4.00 discount on overnight camping at all state parks.

The division is authorized to use revenue earned from parks fees to fund general operations. Moneys are typically used to fund program management and special projects. Other uses for parks fees include the establishment of a parks emergency maintenance fund, equipment purchases, and funding of parks enforcement staff.

Chapter II - Background

FAS Camping Fees

FAS camping fees are \$5.00 per night for fishing license holders and \$10.00 per night for other persons. There are no camping discounts for state park passport holders. Non-residents who purchase a two-day fishing license at any time within the current license year are considered license holders for the entire year when paying FAS camping fees.

Division Funding

Funding for the Parks Division comes from State Special Revenue, federal, and General Fund monies. The division has 17 funding sources and typically receives 21 legislative appropriations. Below is a listing of expenditures from these funding sources for the Parks Division in fiscal years 1998-99 and 1999-00 and appropriations for fiscal year 2000-01.

Table 2
Parks Division Expenditures and Appropriations
(FY 1998-99 through 2000-01)

FUNDING SOURCE	Expenditures		Appropriations
	FY 1998-99	FY 1999-00	FY 2000-01
General Fund	\$ 279,788	\$ 284,076	\$ 285,620
State Special			
Parks Earned Revenue	\$ 689,366	\$ 866,963	\$ 861,693
Motorboat Fuel Tax	\$ 936,937	\$1,073,295	\$1,045,122
Coal Tax Trust Interest	\$ 652,209	\$ 789,867	\$ 856,286
Lodging Facility Use Tax	\$ 403,944	\$ 419,541	\$ 541,820
FAS Maintenance	\$ 116,010	\$ 112,559	\$ 115,771
General License Account	\$ 655,115	\$ 776,535	\$ 792,028
Snowmobile Fuel Tax	\$ 478,916	\$ 624,171	\$ 381,725
Snowmobile Registration	\$ 33,995	\$ 119,371	\$ 64,753
OHV Fuel Tax	\$ 142,603	\$ 123,441	\$ 142,058
OHV Registration	\$ 47,806	\$ 61,045	\$ 73,073
Chief Plenty Coups/Pictograph	\$ 0	\$ 59,175	\$ 540,825
Capitol Grounds Maintenance	\$ 274,514	\$ 294,219	\$ 298,774
Subtotal	\$4,431,415	\$5,320,182	\$5,713,928
Federal Funds			
National Recreational Trails	\$1,064,630	\$ 626,863	\$ 654,000
Wallop-Breaux Regular	\$ 18,361	\$ 34,250	\$ 58,843
Wallop-Breaux Motorboat	\$ 210,542	\$ 131,972	\$ 212,996
Land & Water Cons. Fund	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 50,000
Legislative Contract Authority	\$ 78,585	\$ 16,270	\$ 25,000
Subtotal	\$1,372,118	\$ 809,355	\$1,000,839
TOTALS	\$6,083,321	\$6,413,613	\$7,000,387

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from department records.

Chapter II - Background

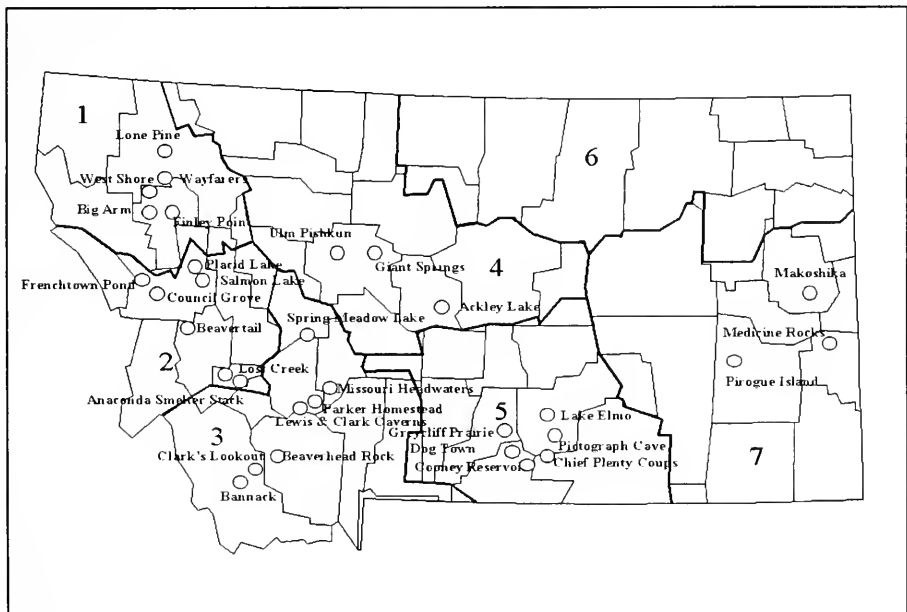
In addition to operations funding, the Parks Division was appropriated \$5,505,000 for capital projects in House Bill 5 for the 2001 biennium. Major scheduled projects include \$2.3 million for motorboat recreation parks, \$1.2 million for improving existing cultural and historic parks, and \$1.5 million for park roads. Other authorized capital projects include FAS maintenance projects funded through the Fisheries Division which amount to \$1.1 million. These projects are all funded with designated FWP moneys from license revenue, lodging facility use tax, and motorboat fuel taxes.

Chapter III - State Parks Operations

Introduction

To gather general information on state parks operations and fishing access site (FAS) maintenance, we visited 30 state parks (66%) and 86 FAS (31%) across the state. Based on these visits, we concluded on the general maintenance and physical condition of division sites. The following map illustrates the seven FWP regions and the state parks visited within those regions.

Figure 1
State Parks Visited across the State



Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division.

Chapter III - State Park Operations

FAS visited are listed in Appendix B. The following sections describe our conclusions based on-site reviews.

Operational Controls are in Place

As part of our review, we examined operational controls such as defined procedures, methods for communicating with staff, and methods for directing program activities. We focused on duties conducted by park operational specialists. Park operational specialists conduct the day-to-day operations at all state parks. The more developed parks generally include an on-site park operational specialist responsible for all duties and activities associated with that site. Their duties can vary. For example, the park operational specialist at Chief Plenty Coups State Park spends considerable time meeting with tribal members and scheduling cultural events. On the other hand, the park operational specialists at Cooney Reservoir and Salmon Lake focus more on monitoring recreational uses of those parks, such as compliance with water safety and camping fee regulations, rather than promoting cultural development. Some operational duties are required at all parks. These include:

- ▶ Developing park management plans.
- ▶ Supervising staff and volunteers.
- ▶ Conducting on-site maintenance and compliance monitoring.
- ▶ Coordinating with various interested groups.
- ▶ Monitoring park expenditures and budgets.
- ▶ Proposing future capital projects.
- ▶ Collecting and depositing state park fees.
- ▶ Compiling visitation data for each site.

Regional park managers are responsible for directing all park and maintenance activities in their specific regions. We found management staff are familiar with their role and the role of the regional and Helena management staff. Regular communication occurs among applicable management staff to discuss on-going activities or potential changes.

Conclusion #1

Operational controls are in place. Defined procedures are available and used for key staff duties and for tracking fiscal compliance. Communication occurs on a regular basis for directing program activities.

**Overall, State Parks
Appear Well-Maintained**

Regional maintenance supervisors are responsible for planning site maintenance needs and proposing capital projects. The supervisor generally has a seasonal crew of one to three FTE who perform regional maintenance duties at numerous sites. In addition to this “roving” maintenance crew at some of the larger state parks, there is an on-site maintenance worker who is responsible for day-to-day maintenance. At the larger sites, regional park maintenance staff are generally only used as necessary for major maintenance projects. At the smaller parks, such as Medicine Rocks or Parker Homestead, minimal maintenance is required and completed by the regional maintenance crew. We found site conditions were generally better at those parks where on-site personnel, such as park operational specialists or volunteers, were available.

Generally, we found state parks well maintained and in good condition. Sites were trash free; areas were mowed/trimmed as appropriate; facilities were cleaned; and roads were generally in good condition. Maintenance responsibilities were clearly delineated and assigned to the various regional staff.

We summarized our audit observations from on-site visits by assessing conditions in key areas at the time of our review. For each site visited, we reviewed condition of the following areas: latrines, roads, signs, litter control, mowing, tables, and fire grates. Problems were defined as “additional maintenance attention was needed.” For state park sites, all areas generally received a good

Chapter III - State Park Operations

FAS Maintenance Practices Could be Improved in Some Regions

rating. The only suggested area where improvements could be made was sign availability for some sites in Regions 2 and 3.

Although an on-site caretaker or volunteer may complete basic day-to-day duties at some sites, there is generally no on-site maintenance staff at regional FAS. FAS maintenance is completed by the regional maintenance supervisors and their roving maintenance crew. Therefore, the procedures and methodologies followed often varied from those used for state parks. To review this area, we examined FAS maintenance through on-site visits and interviews with each region's parks manager and maintenance supervisor. The following chart identifies the number of sites visited by audit staff in each region.

Table 3
FAS Visited by LAD Staff
July 2000 Through August 2000

<u>REGION</u>	<u>Total Sites</u>	<u>Number Visited</u>	<u>Percent Of Total</u>
Region 1	28	7	25
Region 2	50	8	16
Region 3	83	29	35
Region 4	40	14	35
Region 5	38	10	26
Region 6	13	6	46
Region 7	23	11	47

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from department records.

We generally found the sites were clean and well maintained. In most regions, the latrines were clean, areas were mowed, and informational signs were in place. Preventative measures were being taken to encourage use of designated areas and to communicate site rules and regulations. As noted with state parks, we found site conditions were generally better maintained when on-

Chapter III - State Park Operations

site personnel were present such as caretakers or site volunteers. The following table notes key areas we examined and our ratings for each region. A Good rating was given if few or no concerns were noted. A Fair or Poor rating was given depending on the number of sites needing additional maintenance and the extent of the maintenance.

Table 4
Physical Condition of Fishing Access Sites

	Latrine Status	Condition of Road	Signs Available	Area Mowed	Garbage Control	Boat Launch	Fire Rings/ Grates
Region 1	Good	Good	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Good
Region 2	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
Region 3	Fair	Fair	Good	Poor	Good	Fair	Good
Region 4	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
Region 5	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
Region 6	Fair	Good	Poor	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair*
Region 7	Good	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division.

*No staff in this region.

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Generally, we found regional maintenance supervisors had a methodology for assessing on-going maintenance needs. However, we believe steps could be taken to strengthen maintenance in two of the regions. The maintenance methods used in Regions 3 and 6 are more reactive compared to the proactive approach in the other regions.

Formal Methodologies Needed for Region 3

For example, Region 3, did not have formal methodologies for tracking maintenance or following standardized procedures. As illustrated in Table 4, we found sites in that region did not appear as well maintained as in other regions. Audit observations noted sites with poorly maintained roads, littered camping areas, unmowed areas, and unstocked latrine facilities. Although this region has the highest number of FAS, additional staff are also assigned. Three FTE and nine caretakers are available for FAS maintenance in Region 3 which is nearly twice as many as any other region.

No Maintenance Staff for Region 6

We also identified sites in Region 6 where additional maintenance may be required. Currently, Region 6 is not authorized any FAS maintenance staff. Staff in Region 4 and Region 7 split maintenance duties for Region 6 and generally visit those sites once a month during the season. At four sites, we found inadequate signs to direct visitors, poor quality facilities, and unsatisfactorily maintained roads. We believe steps should be taken to strengthen site maintenance in this region as well.

Summary

Without a formal methodology/schedule to track progress and to ensure sites receive routine maintenance, it appeared regular site maintenance was not completed or as closely tracked in two of the seven regions. With the reporting structure of FWP, it is up to the regional parks manager and the regional supervisor to define methods used in each region. Standardized maintenance methods used in other regions may also be useful in Regions 3 and 6. We believe the regional supervisor and parks managers in those two regions should take steps to strengthen FAS maintenance. For example, the methodologies currently followed in other regions include periodic site visits and input from park operational specialists. These methods also included specific staff assignments

Chapter III - State Park Operations

(either by river drainage or on a set regional travel schedule); standardized equipment throughout the region, use of barricades to prevent off-road driving, traffic control measures, and traveling with a complete crew and equipment supply at all times. We believe using these methods would improve maintenance and help ensure statewide consistency.

Recommendation #1

We recommend the department develop and use standardized FAS site maintenance methodologies for all regions.

Division Operations Comply with Statutory Funding Requirements

The 17 different funding sources for this division are a complex mix of various earmarking requirements. State parks' programs have several funding sources for maintenance and acquisition activities. For example, a portion of the Lodging Facility Use Tax is earmarked for maintenance of facilities in state parks that have both resident and nonresident use. Other program activities such as park acquisition and management are funded from income from a non-expendable trust fund based on a percent of coal severance taxes collected (section 15-35-108, MCA).

FAS maintenance and acquisition is partially funded from revenue collected from the sale of fishing licenses. A portion of these funds must be expended based on the following priorities:

- Weed management.
- Streambank restoration.
- General operation and maintenance.

FAS expenditures and funding sources were examined in the Fisheries Program performance audit (98P-02) issued in December 1998, and no concerns were noted. During the current audit, we examined the methods used by the division to track compliance with the statutory requirements. Each month budget reports are generated and shared with regional and parks staff to

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track expenditures. During each budget allocation process, funding sources are examined on a site by site basis to assure planned activities correspond with statutory earmark requirements. As planned activities change, funding sources are also changed to assure on-going compliance. Regional maintenance supervisors track each site separately and are aware of the various restrictions on funding sources. A division-wide project management plan is maintained and monitored by division personnel to assure FAS monies and other earmarked funds are used for appropriate capital projects.

Conclusion #2

The Parks Division budgetary process properly monitors and tracks statutory funding requirements.

Parks Operations Comply with Primitive Park Statutes

As part of audit compliance testing, we examined how division staff ensure compliance with the primitive parks designation in section 23-1-116, MCA. This statute established a list of 15 parks where specific development is prohibited. These 15 sites include:

- ▶ Big Pine Management Area.
- ▶ Thompson Falls State Park.
- ▶ Wild Horse Island State Park.
- ▶ Lost Creek State Park.
- ▶ Painted Rocks State Park.
- ▶ Ackley Lake State Park.
- ▶ Sluice Boxes State Park.
- ▶ Deadman's Basin State Park.
- ▶ Pirogue Island State Park.
- ▶ Medicine Rocks State Park.
- ▶ Headwaters State Park.
- ▶ Council Grove State Park.
- ▶ Beaverhead Rock State Park.
- ▶ Natural Bridge State Park.
- ▶ Madison Buffalo Jump State Park.

Installing electrical lines, creating RV sanitary dump sites, and building new roads are all prohibited at these sites. We visited seven of these sites and interviewed regional staff who are assigned

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oversight responsibilities for these facilities. Based on the interviews and our observations, we did not note any instances of noncompliance with primitive parks statutory requirements

Conclusion #3

Overall the division maintains the primitive status of the listed sites.

Summary

We found state parks operations comply with statutes and have procedures to assure continued statutory compliance. We concluded the following:

- ▶ Operational controls are in place.
- ▶ State parks are well maintained.
- ▶ Some improvements are needed to ensure consistency with FAS maintenance.
- ▶ Statutory funding requirements are tracked and monitored.
- ▶ Parks staff comply with the Primitive Parks Act.

Chapter IV - Policy Considerations

Introduction

In 1989 a State Parks Futures Committee was appointed by the department, with approval from the governor and legislative leaders. This committee was assigned the task of making recommendations about the proper role, priorities, and funding for state parks. In November 1990, detailed recommendations were made to the governor relating to program needs and direction for future parks system operations.

Recommendations from that report provided useful guidelines that have since guided Parks Division activities including:

- ▶ Developing a division-wide vision statement.
- ▶ Completing specific site management plans.
- ▶ Expanding partnerships with private/local groups and other agencies.
- ▶ Re-classifying division lands.
- ▶ Receiving additional funding support.
- ▶ Developing several “model” park destinations.

These recommendations laid the groundwork for the program strengths noted in this report. However, there have been new impacts to the system which warrant future policy consideration.

Changes in the Park System

It has been ten years since the State Parks Futures Report was completed to obtain stakeholder input on overall program direction. Changes occurred which impacted the Parks Division including development of the Ulm Pishkun and Makoshika State Parks and statewide planning for tourism changes relating to the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

This planning will impact specific park system sites and planned activities for the next several years. For example, proposed changes at Headwaters State Park (primitive) for the bicentennial include expanding parking areas, creating new historic signs, and installing an informational kiosk. These

Chapter IV - Policy Considerations

types of proposed changes at any site affect the division's fee revenues, resource considerations, and management at other sites across the state.

Park Fee Revenues

In the State Parks Futures report, it was recommended all users pay equitable fees for use of state park facilities. This has not occurred. User fees at the time of the Futures study (1990) were \$860,703. Ten years later (2000) projected fee revenue is approximately the same, \$861,693. Several changes impacted collection of park fees. The Primitive Parks Act, established in 1993, removed a third of the state parks from the fee system for Montana residents. In addition, park resources for monitoring fee compliance have not increased.

Over the years, there have been several department studies done to evaluate related topics such as the public's willingness to pay, effectiveness of self-pay fee systems, and whether state parks should increase reliance on user fees as a funding source. The results of these studies found the public is supportive of the fees charged and believe the parks should increase their reliance on user fees as a funding source. We believe it may be time to more formally evaluate the park fee system.

Park Resources

Availability of program resources such as funds and FTE have always been a consideration for the state parks system. At the time of the Futures study, it was recommended that over 30 FTE were needed in the next five-year period to capitalize on the economic benefits from a strong park system. Since that time, less than 10 FTE have been added to the system. Fee compliance, quality of visitor services, and program development are all impacted by the number of staff available in the parks system.

Statutory Park Designations

There are two statutory designations for specific site management which have impacts to the park system. The Primitive Parks Act (section 23-1-116, MCA) established a list of fifteen designated primitive parks eight years ago. We found the current law has impacted division maintenance planning and fee revenues. Anytime proposed improvements or changes would change a park's designation, the division must seek, and/or the legislature must take statutory action to add or subtract sites from the statutory list. This limits the division's ability to readily respond to local input for changes or developments at those designated sites. For example, the potential for expanding services and facilities at Headwaters State Park near Three Forks has been discussed with various local and state tourism groups in preparation for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. Due to the primitive designation, park staff are reluctant to propose or initiate any additional development or expansion in this park. In another example, statutory revisions were required in 1995 to remove one park, Lake Mary Ronan, from the primitive parks list in order to pave the access road. (To keep fifteen parks on the list, Big Pine Fishing Access site was added to the list at that time.)

Section 23-1-130, MCA designates Chief Plenty Coups and Pictograph Cave state parks as the assets that are most at risk and vulnerable. The legislature went further by stating those assets should receive immediate priority for preservation and funding. This statute was effective October 1, 1999. As the identified needs at these parks are addressed, priority designations may change. However, changes in priorities cannot be made without statutory changes. Therefore, critical changes at other parks, such as improvements for visitor safety in Bannack State Park, may not be addressed without revising this priority policy.

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Potential Long-Term Policy Impacts

In a department planning document developed to provide direction for the parks system in the next 20 to 25 years, a number of key questions with potential long-term impacts to the system were identified. These questions relate to the need for additional program direction. For example:

- How do FAS maintenance resources fit in with state park operations?
- Are there options for providing park compliance enforcement?
- Should additional program support be developed for interpretative programs, archeological expertise, and administration?
- What are the long-term maintenance and replacement needs of an aging infrastructure?
- Should operations continue to place high reliance on volunteer staff?
- What level of management is required for other Parks Division lands?

Each of these questions represents a multitude of potential scenarios and impacts which should be considered. For example, program outcomes relating to equitable fee compliance can only be assured if an on-site park employee is available to monitor visitor activities. Audit interviews noted compliance doubled in those sites where there are on-site parks staff. However, funding may not be available for an on-site park employee and the generated revenues may not match the increased program costs. This type of discussion and consideration should be raised for each of the listed questions.

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Other Considerations

Several other park-related changes have occurred around the state which will impact Park Division programs. For example, the Montana Historical Society has taken over management of two historical sites, Virginia City and Nevada City. Although management of these two sites correlates with the state parks' mission and site management strategies, no formal link between the Parks Division and the Historical Society has been established.

Other policy questions we believe need to be addressed include:

- ▶ Is the State Parks Program a natural resource protection program or a tourism program?
- ▶ How does having two key historical and cultural sites outside the system impact State Parks operations?
- ▶ How is coordination with tourism and travel promotion assured?
- ▶ How should the state's Tourism Advisory Council and the Heritage Preservation and Development Commission be more involved in parks decisions?
- ▶ Who are the system's primary customers - residents or tourists, or both?

These questions point to a need for renewed policy analysis for the Parks Division. It is time to address these questions and provide long-term direction for state parks programs.

Summary

The issues discussed above illustrate policy areas which directly impact Parks Division operations. The original approach to long-term policy development was taken in 1990 when the State Parks Futures Committee was organized. This committee included legislative members, representatives from the business community, tourism officials, and local officials. We believe the current questions and changes related to Parks Division programs warrants consideration from a similar committee.

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Recommendation #2

We recommend the department re-establish the State Parks Futures Committee to address changes that have occurred in the parks system including:

- ▶ **Park fee revenues.**
- ▶ **Park resources.**
- ▶ **Statutory parks designations.**
- ▶ **Potential long-term policy changes.**
- ▶ **Other policy considerations.**

Agency Response



P. O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701
Ref: DO0098-01
February 13, 2001

Angie Grove
Legislative Audit Division
Room 160 State Capitol
Helena MT 59620

FEB 14 2001

Dear Ms. Grove:

Thank you for the opportunity to work with the Legislative Audit Division on the recently completed performance audit of the Parks Division of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). Below I have listed our response to the recommendations of the audit report.

Recommendation #1

FWP concurs with the recommendation. FWP has recently appointed a new Regional Parks manager for FWP Region 6 in northeastern Montana, which will improve the maintenance oversight of that region. In both Region 3 and Region 6 we will immediately begin implementation of systems to improve maintenance at FASs both procedurally and in field activities.

This recommendation will be fully implemented and integrated into daily maintenance procedures by the beginning of the 2002 recreation season, April 15, 2002 so that maintenance levels in Region 3 and Region 6 will be to the same high standards as the rest of the state.

Recommendation #2

FWP concurs with the recommendation. FWP will work with the Governor's office and the leadership of the legislature to appoint members of the State Parks Futures Committee II to address changes that have occurred in the parks system and to address the issues put forth in the audit report. It would be our intention to have the State Park Futures Committee II report available for the 2003 Legislature.

Thank you again for the very professional way that the Parks Division audit was performed. It has truly been a pleasure working with you and other staff members of the Legislative Audit Division.

Sincerely,

M. Jeff Hagener
Director

Appendices

Montana State Parks	Lake Elmo
Ackley Lake	Lake Mary Ronan
Anaconda Smoke Stack (Anaconda Smelter Stack)	Lewis & Clark Caverns
Bannack	Logan
Beaverhead Rock	Lone Pine
Beavertail Hill	Lost Creek
Black Sandy, Hauser Lake	Madison Buffalo Jump
Chief Plenty Coups	Makoshika
Clark's Lookout	Medicine Rocks
Cooney Reservoir	Missouri Headwaters
Council Grove	Natural Bridge
Elkhorn	Painted Rocks
Big Arm, Flathead Lake	Parker Homestead
Finley Point, Flathead Lake	Pictograph Cave
Wayfarers, Flathead Lake	Pirogue Island
West Shore, Flathead Lake	Placid Lake
Wild Horse Island, Flathead Lake	Rosebud Battlefield
Yellow Bay, Flathead Lake	Salmon Lake
Fort Owen	Sluice Boxes
Frenchtown Pond	Smith River
Giant Springs	Spring Meadow Lake
Granite	Thompson Falls
Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	Tongue River Reservoir
Hell Creek	Ulm Pishkun
	Whitefish Lake

Sites visited by LAD staff*Region 1**

Ashley Lake
Ashley Creek
Beaver Lake
Bigfork
Blanchard Lake
Bootjack Lake
Ducharme*
Flatiron Ridge
Frank Lake
Glen Lake
Horseshoe Lake – Ferndale
Kokanee Bend *
Loon Lake – Ferndale
McKay Landing
Old Steel Bridge*
Pressentine*
Skyles Lake
Smith Lake
Somers*
Sophie Lake
Sportsmans Bridge*
Swan River
Teakettle*
Tetrault Lake
Thompson Chain-of-Lakes
Walstad*
Whitefish River
Woods Bay

Region 2

Aunt Molly
Bass Creek
Beavertail Pond*
Bell Crossing
Belmont Creek
Big Eddy
Big Pine
Browns Lake
Cedar Meadow
Chief Looking Glass
Clearwater Crossing*
Corrick's Riverbend
Cyr Bridge
Daigles Eddy
Dry Creek
Erskine
Florence Bridge
Forest Grove
Forks
Hannon Memorial
Harpers Lake
Harry Morgan*
Johnsrud Park
Kelly Island*
Kohrs Bend
Marco Flats*
Monture Creek
Natural Pier*
Ninemile Prairie

Region 2 - cont'd

Petty Creek
Poker Joe
Red Rocks
River Junction
Roundup
Russell Gates Memorial*
Schwartz Creek
Sha-Ron*
Sheep Flats
St. John's
St. Regis
Sunset Hill
Tarkio
Tarkio East
Thibodeau
Tucker Crossing
Turah
Upsata Lake
Wally Crawford
Whitaker Bridge
Woodside Bridge

Appendix B

Fishing Access Sites

Region 3

Alder Bridge*
Axtell Bridge
Blackbird*
Black's Ford
Bozeman Pond
Browne's Bridge*
Browne's Lake
Burnt Tree Hole*
Cameron Bridge
Cardwell Bridge*
Carter's Bridge
Causeway
Cherry River
Chicory
Cobblestone
Corrals*
Corwin Springs
Coy Brown Bridge*
Dailey Lake
Deepdale*
Dewey
Drouillard*
Eight Mile Ford*
Emigrant
Emigrant West
Ennis*
Erwin Bridge
Fairweather

Region 4

Arod Lake*
Bean Lake*
Big Bend
Big Casino Creek
Reservoir
Brewery Flats
Bynum Reservoir
Camp Baker
Carroll Trail*
Carter Ferry*
Craig*
Dearborn*
Dunes*

Region 3 - cont'd

Fishtrip Creek
Four Corners
Free River
Gallatin Forks
Glen
Greenwood Bottoms
Grey Cliff
Grey Owl
Harrison Lake
Helena Valley Reservoir*
Henneberry*
High Bridge*
High Road*
Highway 89 Bridge
Kalsta Bridge
Kirk Wildlife Refuge
Kountz Bridge
Limespur
Lock Leven
Lyons Bridge*
Maidenrock*
Mallard's Rest
Mayflower Bridge
Mayor's Landing
McAtee Bridge*
Meadow Lake
Milwaukee*
Notch Bottom*

Region 4 - cont'd

Eagle Island
Eden Bridge
Eureka Reservoir
Fort Shaw
Hardy Bridge*
Hruska
Lichen Cliff
Loma Bridge*
Lower Carter Pond
Martinsdale Reservoir
Mid-Canon
Mountain Palace*
Nilan Reservoir
Pelican Point

Region 3 - cont'd

Paradise
Park Lake
Parrot Castle
Pennington Bridge*
Pine Creek
Poindexter Slough*
Point of Rocks
Powerhouse
Queen of the Waters
Raynolds Pass
Ruby Dam*
Salmon Fly*
Sappington Bridge
Shed's Bridge
Sheep Mountain
Silver Springs Bridge
Silver Star
Slip & Slide
Springdale Bridge
Three Forks Ponds
Tizer Lakes
Toston*
Valley Garden*
Varney Bridge*
Vigilante*
Williams' Bridge*
York Bridge

Region 4 - cont'd

Pishkun Reservoir
Prewett Creek
Prickley Pear
Smith River
Spite Hill*
Spring Creek
Stickney Creek*
Table Rock
Truly Take-out
Ulm Bridge
Upper Carter Pond*
White Bear
Willow Creek Reservoir
Wolf Creek Bridge

Region 5

Absaroka
Arapooish
Beaver Lodge*
Big Rock*
Bighorn
Bluewater Fish Hatchery
Boulder Forks
Bratten
Bridger Bend
Broadview Pond
Buffalo Jump
Buffalo Mirage
Bull Springs*
Captain Clark
Castle Rock
Cliff Swallow
Deadman's Basin
East Bridge*
Firemans Point
General Custer
Grant Marsh*
Grey Bear*
Gritty Stone
Homestead Isle
Horsethief Station*
Indian Fort*
Mallard's Landing
Manuel Lisa
Moraine
Otter Creek*
Pelican
Rosebud Isle
Selkirk
Swinging Bridge
Two Leggins
Voyager's Rest
Water Birch*
White Bird

Region 6

Bearpaw Lake
Bjornberg Bridge*
Bridge Park*
Cole Ponds*
Culbertson Bridge*
Duck Creek*
Faber Reservoir
Fresno Tailwater
Ft. Peck Dredge Cuts*
Glasgow Base Pond
Kuester Reservoir
Rock Creek
Whitetail Reservoir

Region 7

Amelia Island*
Bonfield
Broadus Bridge*
Diamond Willow
Elk Island
Fallon Bridge
Far West*
Gartside Reservoir
Hollecker Pond
Intake Dam
Johnson Reservoir*
Kinsey Bridge*
Little Powder River
Myers Bridge*
Powder River Depot*
Roche Juane*
Rosebud East*
Rosebud West*
Rush Hall
Seven Sisters
Sidney Bridge
South Sandstone
Twelve Mile Dam*

